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SUBJECT: PROPOSED ELIMINATION OF THE VOA TURKISH SERVICE

REF: ANKARA 1103

Summary

1. Post continues to hear comments from influential Turks alarmed by the possible elimination of the VOA Turkish Service. VOA serves as a compass for many journalists working in Turkey's free but irresponsible media. Elimination of the VOA Turkish service (while the Kurdish service continues) would also feed Turkish suspicion about US intentions with regard to northern Iraq and the Kurds at a time of growing unrest among Kurds in southeast Turkey. Contacts believe elimination of the service would send exactly the wrong signal about the importance of Turkish-American relations, and would deny Turks the opportunity to get a "Washington perspective" on Turkey and the region. End Summary.

Cutting VOA Will "Send a Message"

2. Leading Turkish opinion makers continue to express dismay at the possible elimination of the VOA Turkish service. Murat Yetkin, influential columnist at the liberal daily "Radikal," told us that he starts every working day listening to the early-morning VOA broadcast on NTV radio. Yetkin says he values the "Washington perspective" of VOA much as he values the "London perspective" of the BBC. Deger Akal, President of the Diplomatic Correspondents' Association in Ankara, said she and many of her colleagues listen to VOA "every day without fail" and use the VOA website as a source for news stories and to get an outsider's view of developments in Turkey and the region. When informed of the possibility that VOA could be cut, Akal expressed "shock" and said that the US would "obviously be sending a message" about the importance of relations with Turkey through such a move.

3. Yuksel Yilmaz, Director of "Radio X," a local VOA affiliate in Ankara, told us his station relies on VOA as its only source of news programming. Yilmaz especially highlighted VOA's "Hello Washington" program, broadcast each Wednesday, which enables Turks from Ankara and across central Anatolia to call in toll-free to talk to Americans (particularly Turkish Americans) about life in the United States and substantive issues important to Turkey. Yilmaz explained that more than 30 of his listeners take the trouble to call in each week, an indication that VOA has a significant following at the local level.

4. Batuhan Yasar, Ankara News Chief at the conservative station TGRT, which carries VOA television broadcasts, said he has been getting increasingly positive feedback about "The Journal," VOA's daily short package of US feature stories. Yasar added that many viewers use the VOA webpage as a "reference for reliable information." He said it would be "wrong" to eliminate the service, a move that would "do nothing to help eliminate the prevailing anti-American sentiment in Turkey." Yasar noted that TGRT has been actively engaged in discussions with VOA Turkish Service about ways to improve and diversify the content of VOA telecasts. He lamented the fact that while the VOA Turkish Service faces cuts, VOA will continue to broadcast in Kurdish and Arabic, a fact highlighted in news coverage of the VOA story in Turkey's leading daily "Hurriyet."

VOA Audience on the Rise

5. As noted in reftel, the VOA audience in Turkey is increasing, and the Turkish Service is heard in a number of key countries and areas beyond Turkey's borders. While exact numbers are elusive, we estimate that VOA broadcasts reach at least 4 million Turks each week - 2.5 million on television, and 1.5 million on radio. This is not insignificant in a country with a total newspaper circulation of just over 4 million. These numbers do not include visits to the VOA Turkish website, which more than quadrupled from 2003 to 2005. In addition to VOA affiliates in Turkey, the VOA Turkish Service is heard by Turkish-

speaking radio listeners on stations in Kosovo, Azerbaijan, and Kyrgyzstan. The VOA Turkish Service is also carried by Turkish Cypriot TV and radio stations in northern Cyprus.

Comment: VOA Supports US Interests

16. One rationale put forward to support the proposed cuts in the VOA Turkish Service is that Turkey already has a free media - VOA's job here is done. The problem is that Turkey's free media is notoriously unreliable. Turks understand this better than anyone, which is why they seek out fact-based alternatives like VOA and the BBC. The elimination of the VOA Turkish Service would be seen here as a lack of commitment by the United States to address anti-Americanism in Turkey. It would also be interpreted by Turkey's active community of conspiracy theorists as part of a US "plan" to favor the interests of Kurds over Turks at a time of growing unrest in Turkey's predominantly Kurdish southeast. Such an outcome would be extremely unfortunate at a time when our bilateral relationship is in a fragile state of recovery following a series of shocks related to neighboring Iraq.

17. VOA is also very useful in giving prominence to areas of convergence between Turkish and US policy, thereby countering the relentless negativity in the commercial media. The Prime Minister's visit to Darfur this week to deliver humanitarian assistance, which was widely panned by the Turkish media, is a good example of how more objective reporting could highlight a positive development and encourage additional steps. Similarly, yesterday's important MFA statement of support for the UNSC decision on Iran was generally ignored in the Turkish press. VOA would have undoubtedly given the story the prominence it deserved, thereby encouraging the GOT to continue to support the international consensus on Iran.

18. The US stake in a productive and stable relationship with Turkey is enormous - from continued cooperation in Afghanistan to help in stabilizing Iraq to adding a Muslim voice to the international consensus on Iran. The future development of our strongest and most democratic Muslim ally is key to the US effort to achieve democratization in the Broader Middle East. A Turkey that is firmly and finally anchored in the West is critical to the United States and the wider Western world.

19. Public outreach is one of the most important activities of this Mission, and is vital to achieving these goals. We spend a great deal of time and resources in our effort to increase media standards and try to bring a more balanced picture of the United States and US values to a skeptical audience. Our job isn't easy, and our message is frequently drowned out by the shouting and sensationalism in the Turkish media. The VOA Turkish Service is an important factor in balancing the scales and setting a higher standard. We believe there are opportunities to expand the VOA audience in Turkey, particularly on television in local and regional media markets with limited access to quality news programming. Given what is at stake, it would be extremely shortsighted to nip those opportunities in the bud. End Comment.

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